

Downtown Boscobel
826-1120 Wisconsin Avenue
Boscobel
Grant County
Wisconsin

HABS No. WI-333

HABS
WIS
22-BOSC,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

HABS
WIS
22-Bosc,
1-

Downtown Boscobel
HABS No. WI-333
(page 1)

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
DOWNTOWN BOSCOBEL

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: The district consists of the buildings that line both sides of a three-and-a-half-block long stretch (the 800, 900, 1000, & 1100 blocks) of Wisconsin Avenue in Boscobel.

Quad: Boscobel

UTM: A 15/686640/4778260
B 15/686650/4777960
C 15/686560/4777960
D 15/686560/4778280

Dates of Construction: Ca. 1862 - 1969

Present Owners: Various

Present Uses: Various. Commercial usages include retail stores, banking, restaurants, taverns, and professional offices. The district also includes a city hall/public library building.

Significance: The proposed Boscobel Downtown Historic District is of local significance as a fine collection of primarily mid and late nineteenth century and early twentieth century commercial buildings that are representative of styles and forms that were typical of such buildings in Wisconsin during the period of significance (1862-1942). These buildings also form both the historic and the present commercial core of the city of Boscobel and are thus of local significance to the history of commerce in the city as well.

Historian: Timothy F. Heggland, May 21, 1993

II. HISTORY

A. Historic Development of the Village of Boscobel

The portion of Wisconsin that now includes Grant County and the city of Boscobel is one of the most historic areas in the state, being associated both with early fur trading activities and lead mining, two of Wisconsin's earliest commercial activities. These activities were furthered by the geographic location of the county, its western boundary being formed by the Mississippi River and its northern boundary by the Wisconsin River, Wisconsin's two great navigable waterways and key early transportation routes.

During the 1820s, what is now Grant County was part of the Fever River lead mining district that straddled parts of Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin, and mining was concentrated in the southern and eastern parts of the county. Most of the county's earliest settlements were created as mining centers and these settlements were well established by the 1830s and 1840s. The growth that accompanied mining also lured other settlers to the area who gradually began the process of clearing land for agricultural purposes.

Boscobel, which is located on the northern edge of Grant County near the Wisconsin River, was not a center of mining activity. The first known settler of European origin in the area was Thomas Sanders, who began a small logging operation there in 1846. Eventually, Sanders was joined by others who began the process of clearing the land. "By the early 1850s a number of farms occupied the present site, a sawmill had been erected on Crooked Creek, and a ferry provided a link with Georgetown, a small community [non-extant] once located on the north bank of the river."¹

The 240 acres of land that was to become the village of Boscobel was purchased in 1854 by Charles K. Dean, Adam E. Ray, Henry Ray, and E. H. Brodhead. Dean was a civil engineer employed by the Milwaukee and Mississippi Railroad and was one of the surveyors of the proposed route of the railroad west from Milwaukee to the Mississippi River.² The new owners selected a site for the railroad depot later in the year. By 1856, the line, which had begun its westward course from Milwaukee in 1851, was completed to Boscobel and later in the year to Prairie du Chien on the Mississippi River.

¹ Steele, Dorothy. An Intensive Architectural and Historical Survey of Boscobel. Madison: University of Wisconsin Environmental Awareness Center, 1981, pg. 4.

² Hubbell, Theodore N. "The History of Boscobel." Written and deposited in the Centennial Chest at Lancaster, Wisconsin, July 4, 1876. Reprinted in the Fennimore Times, December 18, 1918. Lancaster is the Grant County seat. The Milwaukee and Mississippi Railroad was Wisconsin's first railroad, having been chartered as the Milwaukee and Waukesha Railroad in 1847, for the purpose of linking the emerging industrial center of Milwaukee (and thus also Chicago and cities in the east) with the Mississippi River.

With the coming of the railroad, settlement began in earnest. In 1856, the land was platted and settlers arriving on the new railroad began to build the community's first business district just south of the railroad depot on both sides of Wisconsin Avenue. Commercial establishments of all kinds were established, several hotels were built near the depot, and by the beginning of the Civil War, Boscobel had acquired the things necessary for growth; a railroad to ship goods into and out of the area, and a sawmill and flouring mill to serve the surrounding farms. In 1864, a village charter was conferred upon Boscobel the state legislature, the population at this time being about 1200.

B. Boscobel Becomes a City

By the outbreak of the Civil War, Boscobel had become an important area trade center. Produce from surrounding communities and area farms was shipped there to be stored in the village's newly built warehouses and grain elevators prior to shipment to regional markets, and area settlers made their purchases from Boscobel merchants. The peace that followed the war brought even greater prosperity to the village. "The years 1867 to 1870 brought many improvements in the way of business and buildings. In fact, most of the buildings on Wisconsin Avenue (in 1881) date back to those years."³ A major project initiated by the villagers in these years was the construction of a bridge across the Wisconsin River, which was intended to provide the farmers in Crawford County to the north with access to a railroad. The cost of this enterprise was \$45,000.00, too large a sum for the village to bear outright. Consequently, the village petitioned the legislature for a city charter, which would enable them to issue bonds for the project. This request was granted by the legislature in 1873, and the 665-foot bridge was completed in early 1874.

With the creation of the bridge (replaced in 1930), Boscobel settled into another period of affluence as an area trade center. Ideally situated between Dubuque, Madison, and La Crosse, it was a gathering point for crops produced in the surrounding countryside.

This growth inspired others, however, and competition from other communities in the area that possessed alternate transportation routes had the effect of limiting Boscobel's growth and influence.

³ Boscobel Centennial Committee. Boscobel Centennial Heritage Album. Boscobel, 1973, pg. 3. (From Butterfield, C. W. History of Grant County. Chicago: Chicago Western Historical Co., 1881.) A number of the earliest buildings in the Boscobel Downtown Historic District date from this period, including the Hummel and Mattison buildings and most of the district's Italianate style stone construction buildings.

For several years the growth of Boscobel was phenomenal. It received its first severe check when the railroad was built from Woodman to Fennimore and Montfort, cutting off the trade of the wealthy region of Fennimore Prairie. Since then the town has held its own by hard work. The fluctuations of growth are shown by the census reports. In 1865 the city had a population of 1127; in 1870, 1509; in 1880, 1428; in 1890, 1570; in 1895, 1479.⁴

Boscobel was not deeply hurt by the Depression years and the Boscobel State Bank weathered the 1930s without closing. In 1935, the population stood at 2500. Retail establishments continued to be relatively prosperous and farm and retail trade remained strong throughout the 1950s.

Residents still recall the weekly festivities that took place on Saturday nights, says Ralph Goldsmith, publisher of the Boscobel Dial who came to town in 1956. Farm families would come to Boscobel to do their weekly shopping and, in the process, Wisconsin Avenue was taken over by friends stopping to talk.

Since 1968, two-thirds of the farm population has been lost, says Goldsmith. With the farm economy went the retail establishments. Boscobel found itself struggling to attract industry and jobs.⁵

This struggle still continues and it is one that is shared by many other rural Wisconsin communities today.

III. ARCHITECTURE

A. General Characteristics

The Boscobel Downtown Historic District is significant architecturally as a fine collection of nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial buildings that for the most part are representative examples of Commercial Vernacular form, Boomtown form, Italianate style, and Twentieth Century Commercial style design. The district contains 37 buildings and the resources built within the period of significance constitute the largest concentration of buildings within the city that were built specifically for commercial activity prior to 1942. They also comprise a considerable percentage of all the buildings that have ever been constructed for this purpose in Boscobel.

Historic photos and Sanborn-Perris maps of the city show that in 1884, the district was comprised largely of small frame construction vernacular buildings. Nearly all of these forty-three one and two-story commercial

⁴ Holford, Castello N. History of Grant County, Wisconsin. Lancaster: The Teller Print, 1900, pg. 665.

⁵ Community Report Wisconsin. July, 1992, pg. 23.

buildings were examples of either the front gable form or boomtown form. There were also eleven buildings constructed of stone at that time (three of which are no longer extant) and two buildings constructed of brick, all of these buildings being variants of the Italianate style. This mix continued largely unchanged until about 1904, when new buildings built out of brick, stone, concrete and concrete block began to appear. By 1942, most of the frame buildings had been supplanted by larger, more substantial ones built of these more durable materials. Today, only three front gable form buildings and five boomtown form buildings survive, all of which have been now substantially altered.

Some design features have been respected by all the historic buildings in the Boscobel Downtown Historic District regardless of style or date of construction. The main facades of these buildings were all built so as to be flush with the Wisconsin Avenue sidewalks, which resulted in continuous setbacks and blocks of unified appearance. When buildings were built on corner lots the exposed sides were also built flush with the sidewalks. The first stories of the main facades were given over almost entirely to large flat-arched display windows that were surmounted by cornices. The second stories of these facades contained two or more evenly spaced window openings (only two of the district's buildings - McSpaden's Block and the Hotel Boscobel - are three-story buildings; a third, the frame construction Carrier House, was demolished many years ago). The heads of these openings differ in shape depending on their date of construction, but the sill level is surprisingly uniform from building to building and the general size of these windows is also quite consistent, as is the use of double-hung sash.

In addition, all the main facades that are faced in brick or stone were originally crowned with distinctive horizontal cornices as well, while the clapboard-covered front-gable buildings were crowned with molded, overhanging cornices that followed the shapes of the gables.

Commercial buildings such as those found in the district currently represent the leading edge of work involved in the development of architectural typology. Ten years ago, buildings such as those found in the district were evaluated largely on the basis of integrity and on their relationship with the recognized architectural styles. Gradually, though, a more sophisticated view of these buildings developed and "Common buildings whose distinguishing characteristic was their simplicity began to be viewed as keystones in the architectural history of Wisconsin."⁶ Today, enough work has been done in identifying and categorizing such resources on both the state and national levels to make it possible to group them into new forms.

⁶ Wyatt, Barbara (Ed.). Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin. Historic Preservation Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1986. Vol. 2, 3-1 (Architecture).

B. Commercial Vernacular

Most simply designed retail store buildings built between 1850 and 1920 in Wisconsin are now considered to be examples of the Commercial Vernacular form. This form was developed by the State of Wisconsin Historic Preservation Division to answer the need for a category into which could be placed the vast number of such buildings within the state that do not fall within the standard architectural styles. The description of this form included in the CRMP states that:

The label "commercial vernacular" is less specific to a visual type than other significant Wisconsin building forms, and can be generally applied to simply-designed commercial buildings of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. All varieties, if not radically altered, include large retail show windows on the ground story. Upper stories, whether meant to serve business or residential uses, are characterized by simple window openings. Doors to serve ground-story shops and upper stories are simple and, when original, are generally of panelled wood with a single window above. An emphatic cornice with some decorative treatment (compound brick corbelling, wood moldings, or metal friezes, with finials or thick corbels at the ends) and a cornice or I-beam above the storefront are usually the only decorative touches. Simplified period motifs are implied, but without any overt stylistic character. Frequently, commercial vernacular buildings, as other commercial buildings, were partially illuminated on the ground floor by a transom across the facade. The transoms are often covered with modern signage. Although there are free-standing commercial vernacular buildings, many are joined by party walls into continuous commercial streetscapes.⁷

As knowledge of this form increases it is probable that it will be subdivided into smaller, more descriptive categories. Until then, such buildings will, of necessity, be thrown together in a somewhat undifferentiated way. Currently, the form includes many buildings which appear to share slight stylistic identities but that do not yet merit a stylistic category of their own. For now, examples of the form can be roughly differentiated from one another on the basis of their date of construction. Generally speaking, nineteenth century examples of the form grow taller as the century progresses and they are generally narrower than their twentieth century counterparts and are somewhat more elaborately decorated. Early examples are also very much orientated toward a single street front, even when they are placed on corner lots, and decoration tends to be limited to the principal facade. Twentieth century examples, on the other hand, are often broader and less tall than nineteenth century equivalents and frequently display some period revival style elements. Examples built on corner lots also are more likely to be designed in such a way that both the main facades are accorded a similar status and decoration is often employed on both of the principal facades.

⁷ Wyatt, Barbara (Ed.). Op. Cit. Vol. 2, pg. 3-10 (Architecture).

Of the thirty-seven buildings within the Boscobel Downtown Historic District, ten are examples of the Commercial Vernacular form. These buildings are all located on Wisconsin Avenue and include: No. 1028 Wisconsin Ave. (the Blair Building); No. 932 Wisconsin Ave.; No. 928 Wisconsin Ave. (the E. W. Gruentzel Building); No. 900 Wisconsin Ave. (the Graff Building); No. 840 Wisconsin Ave.; and No. 839 Wisconsin Ave. None of them still retain their complete original storefronts, a circumstance that is typical of Wisconsin's smaller communities. The second stories of many of the main facades are still largely intact, however, which is also typical. These buildings range in age from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century and they are mostly representative examples of trends that were current at their time of construction.

C. Boomtown

Although the subsection of the Vernacular Forms study unit of the CRMP dealing with the boomtown form has not yet been published, there are sufficient sources available which deal with the forms' stylistic aspects to permit conclusions to be drawn about its most important features. One of the most accessible of these sources is the book American Vernacular Design, 1870-1940 written by Herbert Gottfried and Jan Jennings in 1985. Their listing of the typical characteristics of the form (which they call the "false-front" form) describes a building which is typically one or two-stories in height; has a wood frame clad most typically in clapboard; and has a principal facade which is either two-or three-bays-wide. The most characteristic feature of the form is the vertical extension of the front wall above the roof. This extension (or false-front) does not usually imitate the roof shape.

The false portion extends the facade vertically and horizontally so that the roof over the main body--most often a gable or flat roof--remains hidden from view. ... On one-story buildings the false portion does not extend much beyond the apex of the gable; the extra section of wall provides ornamentation, with an elaborate cornice built on the front or functions as a signboard. In most cases the false front has been integrated into the facade so that cornerboards, columns, or pilasters are carried up the front.⁹

The authors also note that the decorative cornice usually features brackets and is often made of wood with sheet metal trim and that the windows on the main facade usually have a symmetrical fenestration pattern and are either one-over-one or two-over-two light.

⁹ Gottfried, Herbert and Jennings, Jan. American Vernacular Design, 1870-1940. New York, 1985, pg. 156.

Presently, the lack of consolidated information regarding this form prevents generalizing on the frequency of its occurrence in Wisconsin even though windshield surveys undertaken by the State Historic Preservation Division have found numerous examples in every section of the state. Five examples are found within the Boscobel Downtown Historic District: No. 910 Wisconsin Ave.; No. 911 Wisconsin Ave.; No. 915 Wisconsin Ave.; No. 921 Wisconsin Ave. (S. E. Mattison Building - HABS No. WI-334); and No. 836 Wisconsin Ave.

D. Italianate

The Italianate style subsection of the CRMP describes the commercial manifestations of the style by stating that:

Italianate references typically found are the bracketed cornice, which often rises above a flat or shed roof, and at the windows (which frequently have hoodmolds or even pediments and sometimes are roundheaded). Nearly every Wisconsin city and village has its examples, often surviving in near original form in upper-story wood, stone, or iron hoodmolds, brackets and cornices.⁹

The Boscobel Downtown Historic District is particularly rich in examples of this style. No. 1100 Wisconsin Avenue (Dwight Parker Building); No. 1026 Wisconsin Avenue (the Fred Scheinpflug Building); No. 1012-1022 Wisconsin Avenue (the John & Louis Ruka Buildings); No. 835 Wisconsin Avenue (McSpaden's Block); No. 919 Wisconsin Avenue (the Hotel Boscobel); and No. 925 Wisconsin Avenue (the Henry Hummel Building - HABS No. WI-335), are the best examples of the style in the city, but several others also utilize elements such as semi-circular-arched window openings that are associated with this style in Boscobel.

⁹ Wyatt, Barbara (Ed.). Op. Cit. Vol. 2, 2-6 (Architecture).

IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. BOOKS

Boscobel Centennial Committee. Boscobel Centennial Heritage Album.
Boscobel, 1973.

Butterfield, C. W. History of Grant County. Chicago: Chicago Western
Historical Co., 1881.

Gottfried, Herbert and Jennings, Jan. American Vernacular Design,
1870-1940. New York, 1985.

Holford, Castello N. History of Grant County, Wisconsin. Lancaster:
The Teller Print, 1900.

Steele, Dorothy. An Intensive Architectural and Historical Survey of
Boscobel. Madison: University of Wisconsin Environmental
Awareness Center, 1981.

Wyatt, Barbara (Ed.). Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin.
Historic Preservation Division, State Historical Society of
Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1986.

B. NEWSPAPERS

The Fennimore Times, 18, December 1918. Hubbell, Theodore N. "The
History of Boscobel." Written and deposited in the
Centennial Chest at Lancaster, Wisconsin, July 4, 1876.
Reprinted in the "Times".

C. PERIODICALS

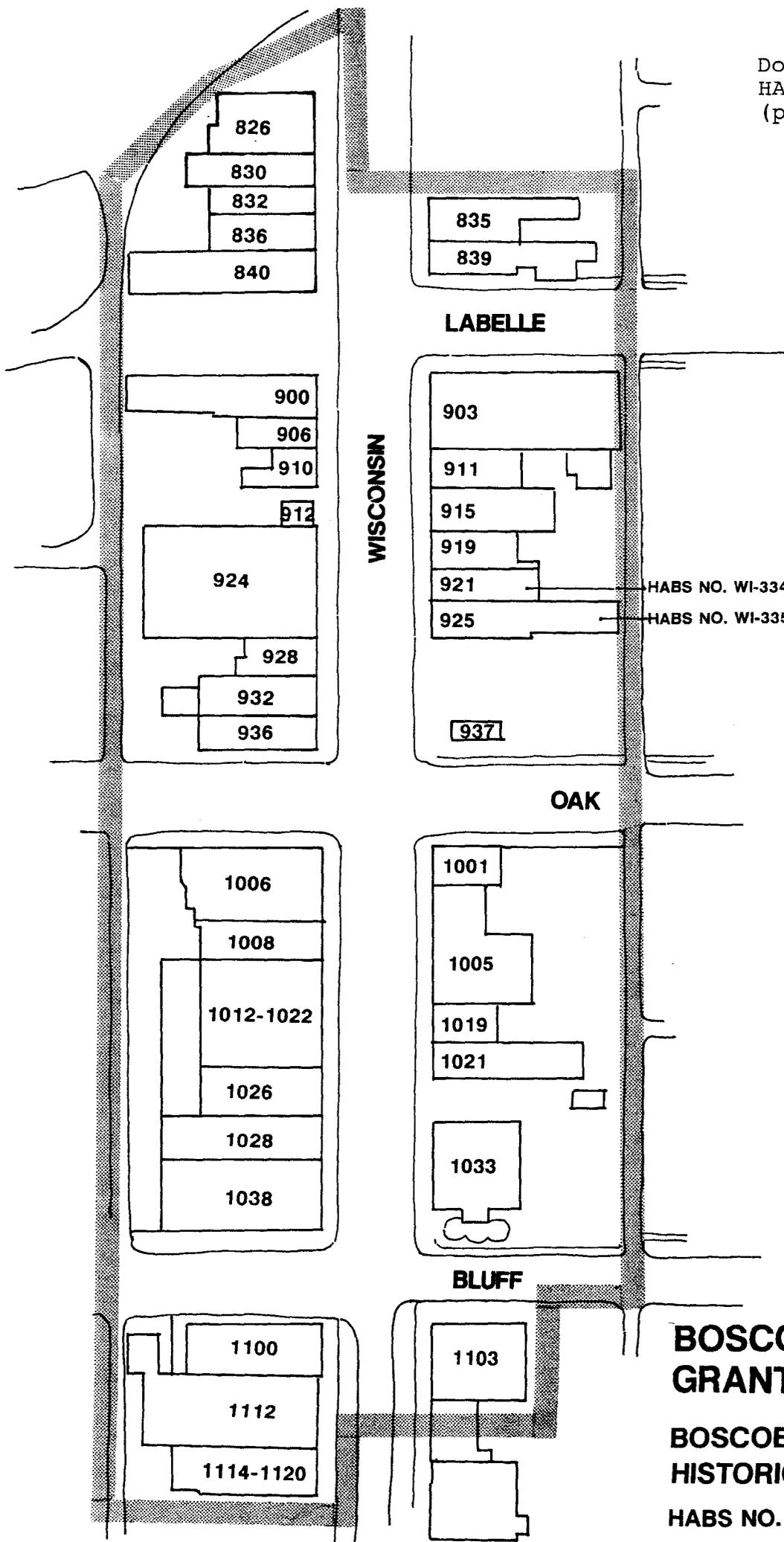
Community Report Wisconsin. July 1992.

D. MAPS

Sanborn-Perris Map Co. Fire Insurance Maps of Boscobel, Wisconsin.
New York: 1884, 1892, 1899, 1904, 1917, 1927.

V. PROJECT HISTORY

This documentation project was sponsored by the Boscobel State Bank. It was initiated as part of a mitigation proceeding agreement between the Boscobel State Bank, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) of Wisconsin, The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and The Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. The SHPO number for this project is SHSW# 92-0712/GT. Other related HABS projects are: the S. E. Mattison Building (HABS No. WI-334), and the Henry Hummel Building (HABS No. WI-335). The photographs were taken by Jim Larkosh of Boscobel, and the historical and architectural documentation sections were written by Timothy F. Heggland, the project historian. Plans call for the demolition of the Hummel Building and the Mattison Building in the spring of 1993.



**BOSCOBEL, WI.
GRANT CO.**

**BOSCOBEL DOWNTOWN
HISTORIC DISTRICT**

HABS NO. WI-333

BOSCOBEL, WI.

BOSCOBEL DOWNTOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT

HABS No. WI-333

